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ABSTRACT

Oral interpretation students from North Carolina State University (NCSU) have been involved in an innovative reading program with more than 6,000 elementary school children in the area. Reading teams from the university travel to schools to present readings to fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students as part of a program which was started in the spring of 1976. The university students claim that the project has increased their communication skills, and all of the teachers, librarians, and principals said that they had evidence that these students had encouraged children to enjoy reading. Books that NCSU readers introduced were borrowed from school libraries, and the children were motivated to do more reading. Limited time and schedule problems were the primary weaknesses of the project since five visits to each school and 20 to 30 minutes in each classroom sparked interest in reading but could not sustain that interest. Teachers of oral interpretation who wish to implement a similar reading project should enlist community and university/college support, carefully select appropriate reading materials, plan meetings with the readers prior to the project, and arrange for funds. (JF)

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INNOVATIVE PROGRAM: IMPROVING ORAL INTERPRETATION WHILE LIGHTING UP CHILDREN'S EYES

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Presented at Southern Speech Communication Association Convention, April 6, 1978, Atlanta, Georgia by Nancy Hill Snow, Assistant Professor, Department of Speech Communication, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina.

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INNOVATIVE PROGRAM: IMPROVING ORAL INTERPRETATION WHILE LIGHTING UP CHILDREN'S EYES

Oral Interpretation students from North Carolina State University and more than 6,000 elementary school children in Wake County received mutual benefits from an innovative reading program during the past two spring semesters. NCSU students improved their own reading skills and inspired new interest in reading for elementary school children participating in the program. The Speech Communication Department and two grants from the Mini Grant Program at N. C. State University provided funds for operating expenses, the Wake County schools gave enthusiastic support, and the students and teacher of Oral Interpretation contributed much time and effort to make the program a success.

In the 1976 project twenty-four students from the Oral Interpretation classes presented three weekly reading hours in nine elementary schools in Raleigh. The Mini Grant funds were used to purchase two tape recorders and tapes which readers could use in their rehearsal sessions and to pay for transportation in N. C. Motor Pool cars for the college students.

The twenty-six teachers, librarians, and principals who completed questionnaires not only praised the program but quite properly pointed out some of its shortcomings. They said that the enthusiastic presentation of children's literature inspired the elementary school children to read the books NCSU readers

introduced. The most significant shortcoming of the 1976 project was that the schedule of three weekly reading hours in each school was not long enough.[1]

The success of the 1976 project encouraged NCSU Speech Communication Department Head, Dr. William G. Franklin, to approve an experimental credit course for the 1977 spring semester. The course was available for students who had completed the introductory course in Oral Interpretation and who wished to devote a full semester to the study and oral presentation of children's literature.

Supported by another Mini Grant which provided tapes, a third cassette recorder, and $150 for a small library of children's books, the twenty-one students who took the course presented five weekly reading hours in twenty-four schools in Wake County. A workshop in children's literature led by Mrs. Jean Johnson, Supervisor of Library Services for Wake County Schools, and assisted by other helpful school librarians, enabled the NCSU students to begin their reading hours with books recommended for specific grade levels. Since librarians and teachers spend less time reading aloud for pupils in grades four-six than for younger pupils, the NCSU program was planned for grades four, five, and six. Librarians in the twenty-four schools gave NCSU readers much valuable assistance in book selection. Readers usually presented twenty minute programs in two different classrooms and also visited the school library to

return and check out books during each weekly visit to their four assigned schools. Librarians and/or principals usually scheduled readers so that only one NCSU reader would visit a classroom on any given day. In the first half of the semester, student readers had regular rehearsal sessions with the Oral Interpretation teacher. Readers were advised to use a variety of books for their weekly programs. Although children frequently request ghost stories, readers presented cuttings from Newbery award and honor books,[2] the Children's Literature Association list of Best of 200 Years, children's classics, folk tales from many countries, and other titles recommended by school librarians.

Three different groups provided information for use in evaluating the 1977 expanded program. Questionnaires were completed by all student readers and by one hundred and three teachers, librarians, and principals. Hundreds of children who listened to the readers wrote letters telling what they thought about the project.

All student readers said the project increased their communication skills. Students said they gained confidence, became more aware of the need for correct pronunciation and articulation, learned how to choose appropriate cuttings for audiences of children, and discovered the rewards of "painstaking rehearsal."[3] Students said that the Oral Interpretation teacher should listen to their first few selections before they read for the audience of

children; however, after the first few weeks, readers know that much rehearsal is required for a good response from children. Readers reported children's audience feedback is different from that in the college classroom. One student described it as follows: "In the Oral Interp class at NCSU, students do not fidget, play, fight, talk, or throw airplanes. In the elementary classroom, if you read poorly, all of the above are probable." Another student wrote: "The children were more open and direct--both with criticism and with enjoyment." A third student said: "I definitely received a more favorable feedback from the elementary school children than from students in Oral Interp class. This response allowed me to present better readings." Students agreed that the main weakness was the limited amount of time for each class. Some audiences were too large because principals or librarians combined two or more classes. Although students felt honored to be wanted by so many groups, they did not experience good empathy with large audiences.

All one hundred and three teachers/librarians/principals said their students enjoyed listening to the NCSU readers and that they had evidence that the college students had encouraged children to enjoy reading. Books NCSU readers introduced were being borrowed from school libraries. A sixth grade teacher wrote: "My reluctant readers were highly motivated by our NCSU readers. They

eagerly looked for the books to find out how the stories ended." Most of the teachers/librarians/principals thought the schedule of five reading dates in each school was sufficient to promote new interest in reading, but sixty-nine said it would be more effective to limit the number of participating schools and assign readers to each school for ten weeks. All teachers/librarians/principals replied, however, that they would definitely like to have NCSU readers in their schools if the project is continued next year. Of the forty-four teachers/librarians/principals who observed male readers, forty-three replied that the male models did have a significant effect on reading interest for their elementary school students. A teacher said: "I think the fact that our reader was a male heightened the interest, especially of the boys." Another teacher responded: "He was a favorite. Since so many homes are fatherless, the male reader is very important."[4]

In listing main strengths of the program, almost all teachers/librarians/principals included the new motivation for reading which the NCSU students gave the elementary pupils. One teacher expressed the views of many as she wrote: "Our reader made reading fun. He motivated poor, average, and good students." Another teacher said: "Children found stories very enjoyable. It is wonderful when children think a good book is as entertaining as other media!" Other main strengths included: variety in selection of books, preparation and enthusiasm of readers, at least one male reader on

every reading team, positive influence on children's oral reading, new faces and new voices in the classrooms, opportunity for students to associate with adults other than their classroom teachers and to discover that even adults who are not teachers enjoy reading, friendly atmosphere with college students, increased listening skills, and the exciting introduction of parts of books so that children wanted to read the entire books. One teacher said: "Readers read just enough to whet their appetites for more of the story, and the books introduced were checked out of the library." The consensus was that children and teachers needed and enjoyed the program. A teacher concluded: "Being exposed to good literature is an important part of education. The NCSU students had time to prepare good readings and to practice their performance before presenting it to the students. They do a much better job than a classroom teacher whose time is limited in the preparation of such lessons." [4] Limited time and schedule problems were seen as main weaknesses of the project. Most replies indicated that five visits to each school and twenty-thirty minutes in each classroom sparked interest in reading but that more and longer visits would help sustain that interest. Assignment of readers did not satisfy all teachers. Each school principal or librarian who scheduled the readers for a specific school had the choice of sending readers to the same two classrooms for five weeks or rotating readers in order to permit more pupils to hear the male

readers. Conflicting views are evident from the following teacher comments: "We need to have the same reader so that the children can identify with him." "I would like to see the readers circulated around the schools so that each reader could visit each class." The attitude of the Wake County teachers is represented by the following note: "I am very thrilled with the program. My class was enthusiastic about the reader, and they certainly looked forward to her coming. The project should certainly be enlarged with more time allotted to each session. Thank you so much for sharing the talents of your pupils with the public school system."

Perhaps the best indication of the worth of the project can be found in letters written by the children themselves. Parts of three letters indicate the typical response from the children in Wake County: "I liked your reading because when there was a question, you made it sound like a question. You also made the cat and the cat's master sound different." "I really enjoyed the stories. I really did not like to read until you read to Mrs. Campbell's class. You have really told me to read without saying so in those exact works." "I liked the way you read. You have a lot of feeling like. . .you were part of the story! It seemed like you had been practicing for zillions of years, that's how good you are. Can you come back and read for us again? I sure hope you can."

With the support of Dr. John A. Murphy, Superintendent of the newly merged Raleigh and Wake County Schools, and Dr. William G. Franklin, Head of the NCSU Speech Communication Department, the reading project is now in its third year. Oral Interpretation students continue to light up children's eyes as they improve their own reading skills.[5] In a recent speech in Denver, Colorado before a national education group, North Carolina Governor James Hunt cited the NCSU reading project as an example of the kind of volunteer program that can help motivate children to read.

Students and teachers of Oral Interpretation can put principles into practice, can help themselves, and can help solve the nation's critical reading problem. This experiment can be adapted to any area where an innovative and cooperative spirit exists between public schools and the university. Prerequisites are careful planning, dedicated students, and receptive classroom teachers and school librarians.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS OF ORAL INTERPRETATION
WHO WISH TO IMPLEMENT A READING PROJECT

1. Community Support

Contact local school superintendent. Only with support of the local school system can the project be successful. For the NCSU project in 1978, Coordinators of Volunteer Services and Library Services selected the ten schools in which NCSU readers work. Local principals or librarians scheduled students for specific fourth and fifth grade classes. Teachers are urged to remain in the classrooms during the weekly reading hours. Teachers serve in three significant ways: they can be good listeners and influence the children, they can cope with any behavior problems which may arise, and they can assist readers by completing the short evaluation sheets on each day's performance. Local librarians have worked enthusiastically to help NCSU readers select appropriate books.

2. University/College Support

Arrange for students to obtain course credit. In the NCSU experiment for 1976, students from the beginning class in Oral Interpretation presented 3 volunteer reading hours. In 1977 students in the first experimental credit class presented 20 reading hours (2 twenty-thirty minute programs in 2 different classes on Tuesday and a repeat performance of the Tuesday program in another school on Thursday). The 1978 class is also presenting 20 reading hours and attending a weekly rehearsal session for the first six weeks of the ten week reading schedule. Students complete a short analysis for each of the 20 books they introduce to their assigned classes.

3. Selection of Materials

If your college or university offers courses in Children's Literature, those area specialists can give valuable advice on book selection. Lo writers of children's books and collectors of local folklore will prob be happy to talk with Oral Interpretation students. In the 1978 NCSU project, two local writers talked with students. This personal contac added another reason for NCSU readers to motivate children to read. When students introduce Purro and the Prattleberries by Suzanne Newton and Always Next August by Thomas Walters, they can say, "These authors live right here in Raleigh and they came to our class and talked to us about why they wrote these books."

Local librarians can furnish lists of recommended books for vario ages, reading levels, and specific interests. A list of favorite stori from a classroom teacher can be found in Elementary English, V. 50, N. April, 1973, pp. 635-6. For ten cents students can obtain a list of "Thirty Mid-Century Children's Books Every Adult Should Know" from The Horn Book, Inc., 585 Boylston Street, Boston, Mass. 02116.

Note to remember: Each reader should choose a variety in reading leve We try to present two different levels each day so that good readers a reluctant readers are motivated.

See also the following sources:

Arbuthnot, May Hill. Children and Books. 3rd ed. Glenview, Ill.: Scott Foresman, 1964. pp. 16-23.

Huck, Charlotte S. and Doris Young Kuhn. Children's Literature in the Elementary Schools. 2nd ed. New York: Holt, Rinehar and Winston, 1968. pp. 30-36.

Sutherland, Zena, ed. The Arbuthnot Anthology of Children's Literature. 4th ed. Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1976

4. Reading Teams

The NCSU readers use the term "team" to indicate a group of students who read for the same schools. Only on rare occasions do they present group performances in any one classroom. With only one hour to spend in each school each week, readers go to different classes and try to motivate many children. Readers Theatre and choral reading of poetry have been used for a few special events when librarians wanted to add a new dimension to the program.

Usually all members of a team travel to and from schools in the same state car. Students who work for the university in food service, library, radio station, etc. are permitted to drive state owned cars. In 1978 we have four reading teams and only three drivers eligible to drive state cars.

5. Schedule

Be sure to schedule a room for class meetings. Plan to have 4-6 class meetings before students start presenting programs in assigned schools. In 1978 NCSU students had lectures by local authors, library services director, and Oral Interpretation teacher. Three class meetings were used for sharing and rehearsal of cuttings prepared for fourth and fifth grade classes. During spring vacation for elementary schools, NCSU Readers met to evaluate their work and to prepare for a performance of selected poetry during the last few weeks of the project for 1978. In 1978 NCSU Readers were assigned to the same two schools for ten weeks. Although this assignment required omitting many schools whose principals requested the program, students and teachers find the ten weeks in each school more significant than the 5 weeks in 1977 or 3 weeks in 1976. Another change in 1978 was omitting the sixth grade students. There is a real

5. Schedule (continued)

need for motivating sixth grade students to read, but we made a practical decision. We did not have enough readers to reach even half the fourth and fifth grade pupils. We also found in 1977 that it was especially difficult to keep the interest level high in sixth grade classes.

Students prefer a school schedule which places the same four readers in the same four classrooms for the entire ten weeks of the school visits. When a school has six fourth and fifth grade classes and only four readers, librarians or principals (who make the individual school schedules) usually try to have different students read for the extra classes each week.

6. Funding

Mini-Grants helped the 1976 and 1977 NCSU projects. Departmental travel money has been used for 1978. We are hoping to get a local or federal grant to provide multiple copies of children's books so that as many as twenty children in a given class can begin reading a book the same day it is introduced.

7. Area for Research

An ERIC search conducted at the 1977 SCA convention in Washington, D. C. produced a bibliography of 50 EJ entries and 20 ED entries. These sources do not reveal any work similar to the NCSU project.

In Arizona Speech and Drama Assoc. Bulletin, Spring, 1977, Vol. VII, Dr. Mary Z. Maher reports on a related activity in Readers Theatre. In The Reading Teacher, December, 1977, Dr. Robert M. Post tells reading teachers how to make children's literature come alive.

Donald Moore, a student in the NCSU 1977 project, conducted a controlled experiment to determine (1) whether children wanted to read specific books introduced by his oral interpretation and (2) whether they did read these books.

Endnotes

1. The author's report on the 1976 project was published in North Carolina Education, October, 1976, pp. 14-16. Her report on 76-77 projects was published in NCJSD, Summer, 1977, pp. 27-37.

2. Frederic G. Melcher, American editor of Publisher's Weekly, donated and named this award as a tribute to John Newbery (1713-1767), the first English publisher of books for children. Beginning in 1922 and every year since, the Newbery Medal has been given by an awards committee of the Children's Services Division of the American Library Association to the author of the most distinguished contribution to literature for children published in the United States during the preceding year. The author must be a citizen or resident of the United States.

3. Charlotte I. Lee and Frank Galati, Oral Interpreation, 5th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), p. 3.

4. In an address at the North Carolina Governor's Conference on Reading, September 22, 1975, Dr. Alvin Gronowsky (Director of Reading, Dallas Independent School District, Dallas, Texas) observed that in America "boys are failing in reading almost three to one over girls." He added that in Germany, a country where fathers and male teachers in the primary schools read to children, "little boys read as well as the girls."

5. In the same address cited above, Dr. Granowsky told classroom teachers: "By the luck of the draw, some of our kids walk into your classroom, and you read with such a sparkle that it lights up a kid's eyes. Another kid walks into that other woman's classroom or the man's, and he can take Dracula and put you to sleep on it. It does make a difference. So if you can't read with excitement, can you find someone else who can?"